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SUBJECT: WOMEN'S ISSUES COORDINATOR VISITS EGYPT

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1.(U) Summary: Andrea Bottner, the Department's Coordinator for International Women's Issues, visited Egypt from July 14 through 19. During her visit, she met with leaders, both from the government and civil society, working on issues affecting Egyptian women, including the fight against female genital mutilation (FGM), women's economic empowerment, and family law. Many of the meetings focused on Egypt's new child law, which criminalizes FGM and trafficking in children, raises the minimum marriage age from 16 to 18, and provides a mechanism for unwed mothers to obtain birth certificates for their children. Ms. Bottner concluded her visit by meeting with Boutros Boutros-Ghali, former United Nations Secretary-General and current President of Egypt's National Council on Human Rights, for a broad discussion of human rights issues in the Middle East. End summary.

12. (U) Over the last 2 years, in an unprecedented step, the GoE has selected and appointed 42 women to serve as judges in Egypt's court system. Ms. Bottner met with 9 of the newly appointed judges, along with Assistant Minister of Justice Osama Ataweya, and discussed the new judges' experiences and role in the court system. The newly appointed judges handle a wide variety of cases in Egypt's trial courts, including commercial, general civil and family law matters (but not criminal cases). The women judges described positive transitions to the bench and said that they had been welcomed both by male judges and litigants. Several have already been selected to serve in Egypt's appellate courts.

3.(SBU) Mushira Khattab, President of Egypt's National Council on Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM) (and a two-time nominee by Embassy Cairo for the Secretary's International Women of Courage Award) led the effort to win parliamentary approval of Egypt's Unified Child Protection Law (the "Child Law") and described for Ms. Bottner the key elements of the law (reftel). FGM is a deeply entrenched cultural practice in Egypt - affecting both Muslim and Christian women - and the NCCM led the effort in recent years to try to end the practice. These efforts culminated in the June 7 passage by Egypt's Parliament of the Child Law, which criminalizes the performance of FGM procedures. Other key components of the law include criminalizing trafficking in children, raising the minimum age for marriage from 16 to 18, and establishing a mechanism for unwed mothers to register the births of their children. Ms. Khattab said that although upper-levels of the GoE supported the law, it faced opposition from socially conservative members of Parliament, some of whom viewed the law as a "Western Project." Ms. Khattab referred to the law as a "revolution in human rights" and said the NCCM will now focus on ensuring the law is fully implemented, which she said will be an "uphill battle."

4.(U) Ms. Bottner visited two NGO's working on women's

issues, the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA) and the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR). She also discussed women's economic empowerment with Dr. Sahar al Salab, the vice-chairwoman of Egypt's Commercial International Bank (CIB), one of Egypt's largest and most influential banks. At CEWLA, which provides legal assistance - primarily in the area of family law - to impoverished women, the organization's director identified extreme poverty as the greatest challenge facing Egypt's women. At ECWR, the head of the organization described its recently initiated campaign against sexual harassment and its efforts to convince the government to enact anti-harassment legislation.

At CIB, Dr.al Salab discussed the success of the bank's women-focused business unit, success driven by the relative economic success of Egyptian women.

5.(SBU) Ms. Bottner, accompanied by the Acting Deputy Chief of Mission, also met with Dr.Zeinab Radwan, Deputy Speaker of Egypt's Parliament. The discussion focused on the Child Law.

Dr. Radwan described the debate over criminalizing FGM as "heated," but expressed satisfaction that the debate ended in the banning of the practice. Dr. Radwan described the practice as un-Islamic and attributed it to Egypt's cultural roots. Dr. Radwan also described "khul'" divorce, a Shari'a law concept, now part of Egyptian civil law, which permits women to divorce without establishing fault.

6.(SBU) Ms. Bottner concluded her visit by meeting with the president of the quasi-governmental National Council on Human Rights (NCHR), Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Boutros-Ghali, the former United Nations Secretary-General, said he viewed women's rights through the prism of human rights. According to Boutros-Ghali, advances in human rights, especially in the Middle East, are being slowed by the rise of religious fundamentalism. He said fundamentalists view human rights as a tool of the West, used selectively to criticize the Islamic world. According to Boutros-Ghali, the West's post-September 11 treatment of Muslims has aided fundamentalists in arguing their case. Boutros-Ghali also said that globalization is forcing people, especially in poorer countries, to figuratively retreat to their "villages" or "tribes" out of fear of the unknown. Nonetheless, he said the NCHR continues to advocate on behalf of human rights generally, and is hopeful that a culture of respect for human rights will ultimately take hold in Egypt and the region.

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